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## EDMUND BERGER: UNCERTAIN FUTURES A REVIEW

ECONOFICTION CAPITAL, CAPITALISM, MARX, MARXISM

Uncertain Futures: An Assessment of the Conditions of the Present will be coming out from Zero Books on February 22nd. To sum it up briefly, the book emerged last winter from a series of notes to myself while trying to think through several related themes: the relationship between Marxian theories of crisis and the “long wave” theories of “techno-economic” development posed by the neo-Schumpeterians; the correlation between crises and other transition-points in economic development and sweeping political transformations; and the rise of the left-wing and right-wing populisms (and indeed, quasi-fascism) in the current world. The “uncertain future” in the title very much refers to the dangerous situation of the far-right coming to power in the United States, which at the time of writing was only a possibility – but has now come true.

-Edmund Berger, *Deterritorial Investigations Unit*

As I finished Edmund's new book *Uncertain Futures: An Assessment of the Conditions* I realized why I've followed his blog for the past few years: keen intelligence, an encyclopedic breadth of his vision encompassing an ethical commitment to real movement of change, and a loquacious and gracious excellence in his scholarly acumen and regard towards other thinkers. Critical, observant, detailed – a thinker whose historical sense is not overburdened by a false historicism, but peers into that dark mirror of our near future as if his diagnosis and cure of our ailing civilization were neither a swan song to its demise, nor a belabored undermining of its forward movement into ruin and decay, but rather as a physician of time – a creature from the far flung future seeking to retroactively elide the toxic effects of our dark modernism.

His work does not waste time but compresses and condenses it into a series of pointed time vectors that rely less on a full tilt encyclopedic knowledge of the terrain, but rather an elucidation of its horizons and secret pathways into the near term transitions of a political economy either going South or discovering its breakthrough into a future that is already there in the pockets of silence everywhere. In the first chapter he'll “elucidate some key parts of Marx's theory (as well as relevant non-Marxist perspectives) in an easy and readable manner, and illustrate how it applies to contemporary economic history from the Great Depression to the Great Recession. The second chapter is to turn to the so-called “Washington Consensus” itself, to look at how

it unfolded from its humble beginnings in 1930s Europe to its application in the United States between the 1980s and today. Just as the first chapter will stress how the future of capitalism as we currently know it is extremely fragile, the second argues quite similarly that the Washington Consensus, itself welded to capitalism's evolution, is splintering apart. Finally, the third chapter will consider the relationship between the current socio-economic situation and various important concepts: fascism, social democracy, socialism, reform, and revolution. (UF, p. 2)

After a lengthy introduction to Marxian theory and practice from a Western economic perspective, not delving into the Russian or Chinese appropriation of it, Edmund will show how in the Great Depression the Keynesian solution emerged and what it meant:

The Keynesian solution is to increase the possibilities of demand through welfare, job growth programs, and other forms of government stimulus enabled through deficit spending. Only through successful government intervention, Keynes argued, could the capitalist economy reach something that looked like an equilibrium based on full employment. (UR, p. 12)

Keynesian theory was forged in the context of economic crisis, most specifically the British unemployment crisis of the 1920s. Adversarial to socialism and Marxism in particular, Keynes worked closely with the British government in developing jobs programs – but it would be in the wake of the Great Depression that his theories would find their highest application, becoming the de facto economic paradigm of choice for both the US and Europe governments. It appeared to be wildly successful: for the US economy, the Keynesian era saw the highest peak in the rate of profit in the modern history of capitalism (1963), the lowest unemployment rate (1969), and the longest bout of income equality (between roughly 1960 and 1970). (UF, p. 12)

And, yet, by the end of the sixties something happened to turn it sour. Keynesianism ran headlong into a crisis, one that would open the floodgates for the neoliberal system that we are currently moored within. Inflation rose considerably, and would transform into a decade-long stagflation that threatened the longevity of the capitalist project itself. The rate of profit declined, having yet to truly recover. Government expenditures threw the dollar into crisis, and the inflexibility of production, particularly in the face of foreign competition, sent shockwaves through the global market. Importantly, this crisis saw no decline in demand and real evidence of a 'general glut' of commodities. Does this mean that the underconsumption theories are incorrect, or that the Keynesian approach is not applicable (from the perspective of the capitalist?) (UF, p. 12)

It's from this that Edmund will provide an in-depth critique and framework for understanding the beast of political economy that emerged out of this failure of Bretton Woods Crisis and the late Nixon Era: or, what would eventually congeal into the deleterious Age of Neoliberalism. Like many others Edmund approaches the use of this term "Neoliberal" with a skeptical eye. For a long while now this term has been a part of the secular Left's arsenal of shibboleths, an overused appellation and icon of the "free market" theories of Reganomics and Thatcherian political economies of the Reactionary Turn, etc. Problem is that it has now been taxed and appropriated to every sundry idea, concept, notion to a point of saturation in which no one can see the forest for the trees. The singular effectiveness of such a term that supposedly compresses in some iconic way the political economy of globalization after the Bretton Woods monetary crisis has lost its valiancy, the coin being rubbed smooth of its iconic graphs. What we're left with is more of a secular mythology of political economics than some actual entity underlying the history of this beast. Edmund will approach it this way:

...the return of finance capital, which gained new traction with the ushering in of the post-Bretton Woods floating exchange rates by President Nixon. Thus what we have come to call "neoliberalism" can be said to start at this point, in the decline of the Fordist system; indeed, one of neoliberalism's most stalwart proponents, Chicago School economist Milton Friedman, had sent confidential memorandums to President Nixon urging him to abandon the Bretton Woods arrangement, noting that it would be a boom for finance capitalism. It is by no accident that it was across this decade that what I call the "neoliberal-New Right opportunity structure" arose to take advantage of the crisis in order to implement a neoliberal policy regime. (UF, p. 21)

This sense of New Right "opportunity structure," and "policy regime" are the effectuations of critical gaze, understanding these in the sense a transformation in wealth accumulation and distribution in which the "overall shift from a Keynesian demand-side policy regime to a neoliberal supply-side regime added a tendency towards wage stagnation in this dynamic transformation" (UF, p. 22). Which as we all know shaped the new world of high finance and unbridled de-regulated speculation, along with the piracy of the older welfare state initiatives into a privatization of debt and the displacement of equality into the inequality of income where the surplus from labour shifts the pay of the "top 10% of income earners taking a greater and greater share of the total US income and nearly rivaling that of the bottom 90%" (UF, p. 22).

The rest of the book outlines a careful diagnosis of this Neoliberal Era along with a possible path forward. At the chapter two Edmund offers without apology a his vision of this past and a possible movement out: "finally, in a time in which everyday life enters into an unprecedented era of degradation, distraction, boredom, anxiety, and fear... in the moment that the oppressed and exploited share a recognition of their existential condition, and take steps to strike back against it... socialism realizes itself whether or not the word 'socialism' is used, whether or not a word of 'socialist theory' is uttered, and whether or not an exogenous factor seeks to embolden the oppressed and exploited. Socialism is alive in both the movement and the outcome, and yet it is not a historical inevitability. It must actively be worked for, which is why to believe in the spontaneous emergence of

socialism, in any organized sense, is to fall victim to mystical idealism." (UF, p. 78)

As if joining that tribe of writers and pamphleteers from an earlier era when socialism was first emerging: Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, and so many others. A world in which as Jack Lond in *The Iron Heel* says:

In the face of the facts that modern man lives more wretchedly than the cave-man, and that his producing power is a thousand times greater than that of the cave-man, no other conclusion is possible than that the capitalist class has mismanaged . . . criminally and selfishly mismanaged. ... Let us not destroy those wonderful machines that produce efficiently and cheaply. Let us control them. Let us profit by their efficiency and cheapness. Let us run them for ourselves. That, gentlemen, is socialism. . . .

Utopian? Sure it is. And, yet, pragmatically assured of reality, too. Rather than an economy of surplus, wherein the capitalist accrues from the worker (labour) that last inch of blood, sweat, and tears of its life in what Marx once defined as: "Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the labourer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has purchased of him."<sup>2</sup>

This was the age of the Wobblies. The IWW (or "Wobblies," as they came to be called, for reasons not really clear) aimed at organizing all workers in any industry into "One Big Union," undivided by sex, race, or skills. They argued against making contracts with the employer, because this had so often prevented workers from striking on their own, or in sympathy with other strikers, and thus turned union people into strikebreakers. Negotiations by leaders for contracts replaced continuous struggle by the rank and file, the Wobblies believed.<sup>3</sup>

Remember that it was under Reagan that the backbone of the Unions would at last crumble with the verdict against the Airline Controllers Union. After that as if the writing on the wall the Unions one after another have slowly crumbled against the state and corporate machines. The Muckrackers of that era would help bring down monopoly capitalism, but since 1981 and the rise of neoliberalism under Reganomics, and the de-regulations of the Clinton era we've seen the rise of Global Monopoly Capitalism. As Barry C. Lynn describes it "in the generation since 1981, when we all but stopped enforcing our antimonopoly laws, a very small number of people have consolidated control over just about every activity in the United States... Even as we were reassured on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis that America was the greatest "free market" economy in the world, a tiny elite engineered the most phenomenal roll-up of political economic power in our history"<sup>4</sup>

So ultimately as Edmund reminds us there "is no guarantee that any of this comes to the end that we desire. But faced with the reality of the present the two stark choices emerge once before us again: socialism or barbarism. Both are implicit in the dynamic movements that frame our moment in history. While both can be deferred and postponed, both are capable of being brought to realization through the actions of people. Given the choice, one cannot refuse, in clear conscience, to partake in the movement to cut barbarism out at its roots. All that is left, when the words of theory pale in comparison to the reality that it seeks to describe, is this movement. (UF, p. 79)

For Edmund there is not third way, there is the definitive choice of choosing one's battle lines: socialism or barbarism. I remember reading Hungarian Marxist philosopher István Mészáros's *Socialism or Barbarism* a few years back in which he reckons that the 21st century will coincide with the third stage of capitalism which he characterizes as the barbarous global competition for domination between a plurality of free-market capitalist systems. In it he'd offer a view onto American capitalism predicting several eminent ramifications to this struggle: imperialist driven territorial expansion in the Middle East, the continuation and increase of NATO aggression, increased infrastructure weakening with major degradation in the quality of life for the lower class, and eventually a proxy war with China via U.S.'s defense treaties with Japan. (see Wiki) He'd describe his Marxist form of socialism:

What is of primary importance is that under all conceivable varieties of the capital system *surplus labor* must be appropriated by a separate body superimposed on, and structurally dominating, labor. Here, as you can see, the fundamental category is *surplus labor*, and not *surplus value*, as people often erroneously assume. ... In order to do away with the labor theory of value, you have to do away with the extraction and allocation of surplus labor by an external body of any sort, be that political or economic. ... In other words, we can only speak about socialism when the people are in control of their own activity and of the allocation of its fruits to their own ends.<sup>5</sup>

The only way to do this is to end the Corporate Fascism that isolates, delimits, and extracts the surplus profits while posing as the authority figure of promise and hope, all the while presenting the face of the kindly parent on the vast technological communications and entertainment index while slipping off the mask and revealing the Trollish Ogre to the laughing commodity kings behind the scenes. Barbarism indeed!

Whether you side with the Ogres or the socialists is your choice. Either way we will know you as you are in the near future. Read Edmund Berger's book, get to know this political economic history in a series of doses that will help you understand what choices are available. You may not agree with his socialist agenda, but you can still understand what brought him to his conclusions and why. That in itself is genius.

Read and buy his book: *Uncertain Futures: An Assessment of the Conditions of the Present*

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1. Berger, Edmund.
  2. "An hour's labour lost in a day is a prodigious injury to a commercial State... There is a very great consumption of luxuries among the labouring poor of this kingdom: particularly among the manufacturing populace, by which they also consume their time, the most fatal of consumptions." "An Essay on Trade and Commerce, &c.," p. 47, and 15 3.
  3. Zinn, Howard. A People's History of the United States (p. 330). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.
  4. Lynn, Barry. Cornered: The New Monopoly Capitalism and the Economics of Destruction. Wiley; 1 edition (December 10, 2009)
  5. Mészáros, István 2007. *Socialism or Barbarism?*: Monthly Review Press (2001)

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